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Rhetoric of stability and change: The organizational identity work of institutional leadership

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Abstract

This paper highlights a dynamic and productive duality in the expression of organizational identity claims between demonstrating coherence with the past and responsiveness in the present. Informed by renewed interest in the concept of institutional leadership, which is precisely concerned with the management of this temporal duality, we argue that its reconciliation depends on active discursive intervention. Drawing from archive data of executive speeches at Procter & Gamble (P&G), we suggest that through dissociation, the rhetorical device to distinguish the claim of an accurate or essential interpretation of core and distinctive values from a peripheral or apparent understanding, leaders actively construct fresh potentialities for organizational change. We thereby develop new insights into the dynamic processes of organizational identity maintenance, revealing its capacity to be regenerative and a herald to the new.

KEYWORDS: Dissociation; Institutional leadership; Organizational identity work; Rhetoric; Temporality

Introduction

Organizational identity discourse generates a continuing leadership challenge. As organizations prosper and endure, explanations for this enduring success are constructed around claims of central, distinctive and persistent identity (Albert and Whetten, 1985).

These identity claims, and the values that they extol, take the form of labels (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1997), which reinforce over time specific value commitments (Blombäck et al, 2013) through ‘the power of discursive labels to influence interpretation, action and thus social reality’ (Heracleous and Marshak, 2004: 1303). However, the value commitments associated with the identity labels were developed in different environmental contexts, to address different goals, for different audiences, and neither their continuing relevance (e.g. Ravasi and Phillips, 2011; Rindova et al, 2011) nor their continuing emotional resonance (e.g. Howard-Grenville et al., 2013) may be assumed. Nevertheless, this symbolic order cannot be ignored, as it serves to re-assure external stakeholders of the status of the organization as an accountable and responsible social actor (Whetten, 2006; Whetten and Mackey, 2002), to provide an underlying structure of meaning for participants (e.g. Cheney, 1983) and to sustain a key source of legitimacy for the leaders themselves, who are appointed as prototypical representatives of the values expressed through identity labels (Hogg and Terry, 2000).

A focus on the struggle associated with maintaining stability yet embracing change in the articulation of value commitments builds on and extends approaches to organizational identity as an ongoing accomplishment (Gioia and Patvardhan, 2012; Pratt, 2012) or performance (Clegg et al., 2007) based on the re-contextualization of past claims and understandings (e.g. Ravasi and Schultz, 2006; Schultz and Hernes, 2013). Accordingly, the persistence of identity labels is not thought to depend on correspondence with some core and unvarying organizational essence but rather depends on ‘organizational identity work’ (Anteby and Molnar, 2012; Clegg et al., 2007; Kirchner, 2013), as managers attempt to provide a sense of consistency with the past while reflecting and incorporating emerging, contemporary interests (e.g. Brunninge, 2009; Chreim, 2005; Gioia et al., 2000; Rodrigues and Child, 2008).

However, the study of attempts to reconcile the contrasting temporal orientations of coherence with the past and responsiveness in the present has concentrated on ‘identity crises’, especially during periods of extremely adverse stakeholder evaluation of the focal organization (e.g. Chreim, 2005; Gioia et al., 2000). Here, managers are thought to have greater latitude to frame interpretation because the validity of past commitments has been undermined. Hence, this work has tended to show that the coherence constraint is of lesser consequence, and that the link to the past is maintained through a superficial stability of value claims, or labels, while the meaning of those labels undergoes fundamental transformation (Chreim, 2005; Gioia et al., 2000). By contrast, we have much less understanding of how an emergent, contemporary meaning for such labels is constructed and justified in the specific context of successful organizations. As prototypical representatives of the values, these leaders remain subject to the strong inherited connotations of the identity labels as their frame of reference (Hogg and Terry, 2000). Equally, they cannot easily draw on the authority of stakeholders to re-define the meaning of identity labels, because the record of successful performance makes any dissonant image-identity comparison less salient. Furthermore, as Gioia et al. (2002) recognize, the revisionism implicit in imposing new meaning on existing labels is also problematic as a continuing process because it carries the risk of generating cynicism among organizational members both for the values and for the leaders who espouse them.

The challenge of reconciling opposing temporal orientations is precisely captured by what Selznick (1957) termed the practice of ‘institutional leadership’. As Selznick (1957) argued, over-emphasis by managers on the idealism associated with the historical character of the organization undermines the status of the enterprise as an open system, capable of responding to opportunities and threats (Selznick, 1957: 146). On the other hand, over-emphasis by managers on responding to emerging problems and demands in the broader environmental

context threatens the organization's status as an autonomous and distinctive community.

Kraatz (2009) and Washington et al (2008) have returned to Selznick's (1957) concept of institutional leadership to call for a new investigation of the ongoing discursive work that is involved in engaging with the core values of the organization as a frame for action. Kraatz (2009), in particular, has drawn attention to what he terms the 'denotative' role of leaders in working to maintain a sense of inter-temporal organizational consistency and he argues that new insight into the leadership role can be offered by a focus on 'the rhetorical . . . ways in which it (such consistency) is sustained' (Kraatz, 2009: 80).

We extend our understanding of this emergent discursive practice of institutional leadership by proposing that through the continuing use of the rhetorical technique of *dissociation* (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969) managers are able to construct value hierarchies between claims of the true and of the only apparently true meaning of entrenched values. In this way, we argue that they engage in a form of 'organizational identity work' (Kirchner, 2013), where entrenched claims of central and distinctive values are both highlighted and then actively translated for contemporary relevance. In the case study that follows, we explore how successive senior managers at Procter & Gamble used different forms of dissociation in articulating the central and distinctive value of 'thoroughness'. We argue that they did this in order to extol enduring commitment to this entrenched value and to re-contextualize its applicability in the light of current concerns. By so doing, they actively worked to make this, and the claim of organizational identity with which it was associated, an enduring core and distinctive value.

This research makes three principal contributions. First, we highlight the role of rhetoric, and specifically the technique of dissociation, as the means by which senior managers can offer a contemporary contextualization of inherited value commitments. We thus offer a further specification of the concept of 'institutional leadership' (Kraatz, 2009; Selznick, 1957;

Washington et al., 2008), and of the discursive practices by which this is achieved. Second, we extend the range of ‘organizational identity work’ (Anteby and Molnar, 2012; Clegg et al., 2007; Kirchner, 2013) by showing that a confluence of the past and the present not only relies on the imposition of exogenous meaning during times of crisis and conflict (e.g. Chreim, 2005; Gioia et al., 2000), but also may be chronically reproduced through the rhetoric of dissociation, as an endogenous process based on close and nuanced exploration of the very meaning of past labels. In this way, we respond to the call for further study of organizational identity as an ongoing temporal accomplishment (e.g. Anteby and Molnar, 2012; Clegg et al., 2007; Gioia et al., 2013; Pratt, 2012; Schultz and Hernes, 2013) in order to provide new insight into how persistent claims of organizational value commitments may facilitate processes of incremental change (Gagliardi, 1986). Finally, by our focus on the work required to continuously validate consistent organizational identity claims as a frame for action, we provide a new integration of structural and social construction approaches in this field, emphasizing both ‘the constraints channeling and shaping members’ interpretations . . . (and) the freedom that members enjoy in renegotiating shared interpretations about what their organization is about and what its official identity claims really mean to them’ (Ravasi and Schultz, 2006: 436).

The temporal duality of organizational identity work

Our understanding of organizational identity as a complex temporal construction is now firmly established (e.g. Brown, 2006; Chreim, 2005; Corley and Gioia, 2004; Gioia, et al., 2000; Schultz and Hernes, 2013; Ybema, 2010). A central theme here is that the linear temporal frame associated with organizational identity, linking the organizational past to the organizational present and future, is precariously constructed through ‘rhetorical processes to reconstrue and reformulate meanings of past events and actions’ (Sillince and Simpson, 2010: 121) in order to sustain its plausibility as a resource for action. Schultz and Hernes (2013: 17)

suggest that this focus on the temporal construction of organizational identity is particularly concerned with how ‘connections between the past and future are highlighted, modified, suppressed, or ignored’ in response to the contingent challenges presented by the contemporary context. As Anteby and Molnar (2012) demonstrate in their study of Snecma, the persistence of a valued identity claim is dependent on ongoing rhetorical strategies to selectively prioritize particular elements of the organizational past while other elements may be deliberately underplayed or omitted in order to make sense of and neutralize potentially disruptive contradictions.

An emphasis on claims of identity continuity as an ongoing discursive process draws attention to a parallel challenge in the articulation of personal and organizational individuality or ‘selfhood’ (Pratt, 2012; Pratt and Kraatz, 2009; Sillince and Simpson, 2010). People are understood to engage in ‘identity work’ as they seek to reconcile necessarily contingent, potentially conflicting self-representations with claims of self-consistency over time (e.g. Clarke et al., 2009; Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003; Watson, 2009). Similarly, managers may be thought to engage in ‘organizational identity work’ (Anteby and Molnar, 2012; Clegg, 2007; Kirchner, 2013) as they seek to make claims of organizational consistency over time despite the inherent complexity of the multiple perspectives and interests with which the organization is associated. Indeed, Pratt (2012: 38) asserts that the common focus of ‘identity work’ is on integrative processes because, ‘any given entity – whether an individual or organization – is expected to be responsive to different constituent demands (i.e. have multiple identities) while at the same time being judged as a coherent whole’.

We highlight the role of managers in this ‘organizational identity work’ because we follow Pratt and Foreman (2000: 18) in arguing that the explicit challenge of ‘managing multiple organizational identities is a primary function of modern organizational managers’. This is

not to underplay the role that individuals and interest groups may each play in articulating, negotiating and legitimizing differing claims of organizational identity (e.g. Brown, 2006; Czarniawska, 1997; Humphreys and Brown, 2002). Rather, this is to recognize the particular role of managers who have unique informational, positional and material resources that enable them to act as organizational spokespeople and representatives in the organization's relations with stakeholders (Scott and Lane, 2000). This role includes a political agenda to promote a functional consensus among differing identity claims for purposes of resource mobilization (Cheney, 1991; Rodrigues and Child, 2008), while yet tolerant of divergent perspectives that facilitate adaptive organizational responsiveness (Sillince and Brown, 2009). We suggest below that a particularly significant context for such 'organizational identity work' lies in the reconciliation of the duality between identity claims of stable, enduring values and those identity claims of organizational responsiveness to contingent, emerging demands. We further contend that the struggle to engage with these contrasting temporal orientations points to the central significance of the on-going interplay between claims of temporal similarity and difference (Clegg et al., 2007) and to the role of managers in the reconciliation of this duality in such a way that a common language and set of shared understandings among organizational participants is actively sustained (Pratt and Kraatz, 2009).

Scholars who have highlighted the legitimizing role of identity claims place particular emphasis on the need to establish and maintain strong claims of the relationship of the organization to its past, in order for the organization to avoid being seen as unpredictable, indistinguishable, and untrustworthy (King et al., 2010; Whetten, 2006; Whetten and Mackey, 2002). Through the assertion of the inter-temporal consistency of core and distinctive values, managers signal a unique, self-governing organizational perspective and a set of parameters by which the organization can be judged (Whetten, 2006). This takes the form of recurring

reference to the enduring relevance of organizational values and beliefs that are associated with its founding and with notable innovations and milestones (Delahaye et al., 2009). Although such reference to collective values is intrinsically fictional (Brown, 2006), and therefore potentially available for revision (Brunninge, 2009), the expectations of organizational coherence serve as a reinforcement mechanism that tends to stabilize particular claims, or labels, of core organizational values (Gioia et al., 2000: 73).

Senior managers can be expected to endorse these value claims derived from the organization's past not only to re-assure external stakeholders of the status of the organization as an accountable and responsible social actor but also to promote and sustain integrating bonds of identification among organizational participants (e.g. Cheney, 1983). In this way, membership boundaries and the role expectations with which they are associated, are defined and validated by framing employees' beliefs about what has been, and remains, desirable, appropriate and effective in the organizational context (Alvesson and Wilmott, 2002). This serves to construct current participants as custodians of an aspirational moral quest, who are thus enjoined 'into calibrating their senses of self with a restricted catalogue of corporate-approved identities' (Alvesson et al. 2008:16). Thus, organizational members become deeply invested in the coherence discourse of organizational identity, and any departure from this is highly visible (Brown and Humphreys, 2002), threatening the ability of managers to motivate and direct employees (Ellemers et al, 2004: 467).

However, this assertion of coherence with the past is not the only temporal orientation associated with the definition of central and distinctive organizational values. Scholars have also noted the role of identity claims to convey flexibility and responsiveness in the present. In keeping with contemporary views of identity that emphasize the autonomy of the agent (Czarniawska, 1997), particular importance is attached to identity claims that display a reflexive competence to judge or evaluate the appropriateness and the effectiveness of any

particular value commitment. Thus, research has highlighted the need for organizational identity claims to reflect changing or emerging stakeholder interests (e.g. Dutton and Dukerich, 1991; Scott and Lane, 2000), organizational practices (e.g. Rindova et al, 2011), strategic priorities (e.g. Ravasi and Phillips, 2011; Rodrigues and Child, 2008) and aspirations (e.g. Carlsen, 2006). The idea here is that organizational identity claims may exhibit the quality of flexibility by the efforts of organizational participants to adapt and expand the meaning of identity claims in order to ensure their current and prospective relevance. As Ybema (2010: 486) argues, the objective is to open a ‘present-future field of desire, promise and purpose’, through the optimistic consideration of ‘who we are becoming’ or ‘who we hope to become’ as an organization.

The management of these contrasting temporal perspectives has focused, in particular, on the effect of ‘identity crises’ during periods of extremely adverse stakeholder evaluation of the focal organization (e.g. Chreim, 2005; Ybema, 2010). It is argued that the coherence dimension within the discourse of organizational identity may carry less weight at this time, and indeed may be explicitly rejected (Chreim, 2002; Fiol, 2002; Ybema, 2010). The crisis enhances the definitional authority of the senior management to fundamentally re-frame the organization and re-gain the support of highly critical stakeholders (Chreim, 2002, 2005; Scott and Lane, 2000). Senior managers may even act proactively by projecting adverse stakeholder responses as a means to radically shift commitment to established values (Corley and Gioia, 2004; Gioia et al, 2002). Accordingly, reference to past values here is seen to be open to a very high degree of revisionism. As Gioia et al (2000) argue, and Chreim (2005) empirically demonstrates, claims of coherence can be carried in the superficial maintenance of value-laden labels, with a new meaning of these labels imposed by senior managers to re-set the organization. Hence, the focus of this work on periods of crisis and conflict tends to

emphasize the flexible, responsive and emergent aspect of the identity discourse while underplaying the significance of the coherence dimension of organizational identity claims.

What is largely neglected is how reconciliation of these contrasting temporal orientations may occur in successful organizations, where senior managers are more constrained in how they articulate entrenched value labels and the meanings with which they are associated. Here, given a successful record of achievement, senior managers are unlikely to receive unequivocal stakeholder responses as the catalyst and authorization for the imposition of new value commitments or of new meaning for established commitments. Furthermore, these senior managers are appointed as prototypical representatives of the values, and remain subject to the strong inherited connotations of the identity labels as their frame of reference (Hogg and Terry, 2000). Nevertheless, they must still engage in the contemporary contextualization of established value commitments. Without addressing the connection between entrenched values and emerging strategies and practices, the organization is liable to ‘identity drift’. Defined by Ravasi and Phillips (2011: 127) as ‘increasing misalignment between past claims and beliefs embodied in official identity statements and changing managers’ beliefs manifested in new strategic investments’, ‘identity drift’ has the effect of undermining the link between organizational practice and organizational representation. As a consequence of this dissonance, participants are liable to question the link to the past, (‘we are not what we were’) and to question the authenticity or accuracy of identity claims (‘we are not who we say we are’). This risk of ‘identity drift’ also has a strong emotional dimension, as it cannot be assumed that participants will continue to experience and understand value commitments with anything approaching the same intensity as that experienced by participants in the past (Howard-Grenville et al., 2013).

The challenge, then, is to recover (Ravasi and Schultz, 2006), or to discover (Ravasi and Phillips, 2011) the relationship of the organization to its past in such a way that established

claims are re-focused and re-enacted in the light of current circumstances. In the section that follows, we argue that this identity struggle to balance claims of organizational coherence with claims of responsiveness constitutes what Selznick (1957: 142) defined as the need to assert ‘institutional leadership’ – the requirement to strike an appropriate balance between the ‘utopianism’ carried in ideals inherited from the past, and the pragmatic ‘opportunism’ associated with responding to the demands of the present. Drawing on renewed interest in the discursive practice of institutional leadership (Kraatz, 2009; Washington et al., 2008), we frame a research approach to explore how the rhetorical treatment of entrenched values can work towards a reconciliation of these opposing temporal orientations.

Institutional leadership

Selznick (1957:15) proposed that organizations take on an institutional form as ‘an organization acquires a self, a distinctive identity . . . This involves the taking on of values, ways of acting and believing that are deemed important for their own sake’ (Selznick, 1957: 48). These values, as Kraatz (2009) suggests, are sustained through the expression of a diachronic logic of inter-temporal integrity. However, Selznick (1957:5) also recognized the need for the organizational institution to be seen as ‘a product of social needs and pressures – a responsive and adaptive organism’. This implies that the utopian, diachronic discourse must be tempered with an acceptance of the need to accommodate emerging demands and opportunities in the environment, reflecting what Kraatz (2009) terms the expression of a synchronic logic. Furthermore, Selznick (1957) was clear that a balance must be struck between these competing logics. Over-emphasis on the idealism of the historical character was seen to threaten the characterization of the enterprise as an open system, capable of responding to opportunities and threats (Selznick, 1957: 146). Over-emphasis on responding to emerging problems and demands in the broader environmental context was seen to threaten its attribution of autonomy and distinctiveness as a community and to re-define the

organization as holding a merely technical and instrumental role. The on-going reconciliation of these contrasting temporal logics is what Selznick (1957) framed as the challenge of ‘institutional leadership’.

Kraatz (2009) and Washington et al (2008) have returned to Selznick’s (1957) concept of ‘institutional leadership’ to place particular emphasis on the on-going discursive work that is involved in maintaining and renewing the ‘thematic coherence’ (Washington et al., 2008) that connects the organization to its core values as a frame for action. Kraatz (2009) defines this as a critical ‘denotative’ role for leaders, and he proposes that rhetoric and symbolism are key processes to reconcile demands for responsiveness to contemporary challenges with the need to convey a sense of inter-temporal organizational consistency. Suddaby et al. (2010) similarly call for an examination of the role of rhetoric as the means by which inherited labels from the past may be reconstructed in such a way that ‘connotes both a sense of identity and integrity of core values and a sense of progress’ (Suddaby et al. 2010: 167). Such a focus on how leaders offer nuanced articulation and re-articulation of the ‘same’ values is thus thought to offer insight into the continuous organizational identity work involved to ensure their on-going accomplishment. As Gehman et al. (2013: 105) suggest, discourse around values implies a mode of deliberate consideration where, ‘(r)ather than the final word, talk about values and how they should be performed open(s) more questions about their proper performance’.

We draw on this approach to suggest that a central concern for the practice of institutional leadership lies precisely in the maintenance of the claims of organizational consistency – actively renewing the connection of the organization to its core values as a frame for action. Consistent with approaches to organizational identity as an ongoing accomplishment (e.g. Gioia and Patvardhan, 2012; Schultz and Hernes, 2013), our focus is on the re-working of value commitments to be simultaneously coherent with the past, yet also regenerative and a

herald to the new. We assert with Farjoun (2010) that new insight is offered by moving beyond a necessary temporal, spatial or structural separation of stability and change to explore how managers may reconcile their opposition so that they reinforce each other in continuous processes of renewal. As Farjoun (2010: 210) further contends, a core process in resolving the tension between stability and change lies in the ‘active differentiation and refinement of existing distinctions, creation of new discrete categories out of continuous streams of events, and a nuanced appreciation of context and alternative ways to deal with it’. We propose that the consideration of organizational identity as the review and refinement of existing structures of meaning calls for an examination of the rhetorical processes by which new meanings are given to the organization’s established value claims without undermining its significance as a source of coherence. Put simply, how can reference to historical value commitments promote new attention and new approaches towards current concerns, yet simultaneously draw on prior understandings and attachments? More specifically, how do the leaders rhetorically draw on these values as a flexible yet stable resource in order to maintain organizational integrity while facilitating organizational dynamism?

Methodology

Given the exploratory nature of this research, we sought a detailed set of internally directed organizational discourse over a substantial period of time within an organization that had survived and prospered over several decades. Our priority, then, was to work from a dataset that was appropriate for its relevance to our theoretical focus, a form of theoretical sampling (Yin, 1994). The organization selected for study was Procter & Gamble (P&G). P&G was chosen because it represents an ‘extreme case’ of the phenomena that we sought to study, where we could expect processes of interest to be transparently observable and, thus, yield illuminating insight into an understudied practice for the development of new theory (Eisenhardt, 1989; Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007; Yin, 1994). P&G has demonstrated a

remarkable impulse for regeneration since its founding in 1837, with an ongoing record of sales and profit growth over successive generations, and sustained creativity based on consistent innovations in products, processes and organizational management. Notably, it is an organization that is also distinctive for its widely reputed pride in the consistency of its values over time (Dyer et al. 2004). Furthermore, the convention at P&G to promote its senior managers only from within (Dyer et al. 2004) implies that regeneration is dependent on internally developed social and cultural practices, and their evolution over time, rather than on sudden shifts undertaken by managers with training and experience outside of P&G. This is a research context that is particularly well suited to exploring the rhetorical practice of reference to enduring values and its relationship to organizational stability and change.

The potential value in the study of an individual extreme case was enhanced by the quality and novelty of the research data that we were able to secure, promising rich exploration of the phenomena of interest (Siggelkow, 2007). We were granted access on a negotiated basis to various classes of documents within the P&G archive in Cincinnati, to gather and transcribe data relating to strategy, culture and organizational change. As we came to more clearly specify our research focus, we chose to concentrate on a detailed study of internal communication during the period 1980-2000. Here, we were able to draw on the speeches on the speeches and presentations made by senior managers to internal audiences of managers in the upper but not most senior ranks of the corporate hierarchy announcing and explaining important policy developments. A total of 177 executive speeches were analyzed with a combined word length of approximately 400,000 words. These presentations and speeches were identified as consistent with our research focus, because they were directed at internal audiences for the purpose of articulating and justifying decisions about the future direction of the organization and its component divisions. One of the strengths of such naturally occurring language as a data source lies in the fact that it is not constructed by the researcher, but is

“recovered” from the context in which it was employed. This constitutes a primary validity claim because theoretical insights that emerge from the research are grounded in the actual words of the organizational participants drawn from the context in which they were used (Silverman, 1993). The 20 year period covered by the data was also important because it allowed a comparative logic (Eisenhardt, 1989) across periods of differing leadership styles and emphasis, differing strategic concerns and differing levels of corporate performance. Any consistency in patterns of reference to core values could therefore be considered as a form of argumentation repeatedly deployed at P&G.

Analysis proceeded by careful extraction from the executive speeches of strategic arguments that made reference to historical value commitments. In this way, we sought to identify deliberate acts of selective recollection that served to justify current and future action. This primary filtering strategy produced almost 400 specific instances of reference to the past in the context of change (including multiple discrete references dealing with different themes and periods within a single presentation). We further refined this dataset by seeking to evaluate how an agenda for organizational development depended on evolving interpretations of core and entrenched value claims. For the purposes of clarity and consistency across our timeframe, we decided to focus on the articulation and re-articulation of one particular and representative set of values. Our choice of the set of values for analysis was strongly influenced by a clear articulation of the ‘character’ of P&G offered in a speech to senior managers by the outgoing CEO, E. G. Harness, on his elevation to President of the company in 1981. Although he emphasized many notable attributes of the organization and its people, he particularly underlined the value of ‘thoroughness’. As he stated,

‘If thoroughness isn’t the most important attribute of P&G character, it is certainly the most pervasive. It is a cardinal principle in every operation at every location of the Company and, thus, is a foundation on which much of our character is built.’

This value of ‘thoroughness’ had been similarly identified in a seminal and frequently cited speech given by W. L. Lingle, the first Vice President of International Operations, over twenty years before in 1960, which had addressed ‘the character of the Procter & Gamble Company’. This provided us with further insight into the meaning of ‘thoroughness’ as a governing ethos by linking this concept with a spirit of individual responsibility and open communication. As Lingle defined the value, ‘thoroughness’ only emerged from a deeply felt sense of personal accountability, fostered by delegated authority to the greatest extent possible, and the honest, undistorted evaluation of results:

‘I have asked a number of people what single characteristic they felt to be dominant in the character of the Procter & Gamble Company. The characteristic which has been most frequently mentioned has been that we are so thorough and self disciplined in everything we do . . . Our characteristic thoroughness must also be derived from our system of individual responsibility, and on our emphasis on good communications within the company.’

Iterating between this data and theories of rhetoric, we looked for common forms of argumentation that drew on this value of ‘thoroughness’ - and its associated emphasis on rigorous and disciplined analysis, on personal responsibility and on constructive interaction - to argue for change. Our surprising finding that these arguments for change frequently depended on value distinctions between the true and the apparent, superficial or mistaken significance of this historical value commitment led us to identify *dissociation* (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969) as a crucial and recurring rhetorical practice, and towards a further examination of the different forms of dissociation that were manifested by the P&G executives.

Dissociation is a powerful means for textual reformulation, which as Cuenca and Bach (2007: 149) suggest, is ‘a complex discourse function by which the speaker re-expresses an idea in order to be more specific . . . ensures textual cohesion and at the same time facilitates discursive progression’. Dissociation concerns the ‘desire to remove an incompatibility arising out of the confrontation of one proposition with others, whether one is dealing with

norms, facts or truths' (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969: 413). The use of dissociation accepts the original or prior unification of data, but seeks to re-cast incompatibility within the unity through an adjustment of data into a hierarchical regime. This consists of a contrast of concepts between what is actual, immediate or known directly (Term I) and the general principle, criterion or norm (Term II), which allows judgment of those aspects that are of value and those that are illusory, erroneous or transitory. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969) illustrate the practice of dissociation through the prototype of *appearance-reality* as a Term I-Term II pair. By establishing this categorization scheme, an unclear, ambiguous or contradictory set of observations can be separated into those of value (corresponding to Term II) and those that are to be regarded as erroneous or misperceived (corresponding to Term I). Although the appearance-reality is a particularly common pair, there are many others in common usage, which establish such a hierarchical relation. Examples include opinion-knowledge, letter-spirit, means-end, symbol-thing, act-consequence. The rhetorical device of dissociation thus serves to establish a conceptual apparatus or argumentation structure, where Term II is attributed with general validity and Term I is conceived as a particular instance that is evaluated on the basis of its relation to Term II.

In the case study that follows, we draw out the practical implications of the use of dissociation as a means by which entrenched values become a dynamic resource, capable of balancing demands for stability and change. We seek to explore how, through processes of dissociation, managers at P&G could extol their enduring commitment to the value of 'thoroughness' while simultaneously constructing and promoting new future-oriented perspectives.

Case Study

Rhetoric versus reality

Our research suggests that senior managers consistently established a fundamental distinction between the identity-defining concept of ‘thoroughness’ as an ideal to which all organizational participants aspired and the discrepancies that they observed in contemporary practice. As Harrison et al., (2009) suggest, this core value was invested with a ‘sacred’ quality because it encapsulated much of what members regarded as setting them apart both as individual professionals and, collectively, as an organization. The association of ‘thoroughness’ with self-discipline and personal responsibility also provided a clear link with the American ethic of self-reliance and autonomy. Hence, the claim that participants might be falling short of this ideal in the present, as Harrison et al. (2009) further contend, carried the force of sacrilege, that is as a violation that demanded urgent, corrective action.

Senior managers at P&G applied this sense of sacrilege in failing to live up to the ideal of ‘thoroughness’ to challenges of both productivity and growth. For example, J.G. Smale, the CEO between 1980 and 1989, argued that managers neglected the need for ‘thoroughness’ in their own actions and in those of their subordinates if they complacently failed to demand and reinforce the high performance standards associated with the company values. He contended that managers had been content to express performance expectations, and to assume their fulfillment, rather than actively work for their implementation. As he stated:

‘Frankly, I don’t think we have been as demanding as we should be in relation to the performance standards that we expect all employees to meet. . . In my judgment we have not been diligent enough in administering those standards . . . The productivity program. . . is designed to see us get considerably more demanding in the administration of the Company’s standards of performance.’ (J. G. Smale, December 1982)

In his eventual rise to become CEO, J. E. Pepper was similarly concerned with the discrepancy between espoused ideals and the extent to which they were realized in contemporary practice. As Head of US and then International Operations, he continuously highlighted the enduring importance of the internalization of P&G values as key driver of the

organization's longstanding success. Thus, when Pepper sought to frame an agenda for change to improve the effectiveness of global expansion, he emphasized the limited extent to which this had been tied to the metrics of personal accountability and to the role of unconstrained communication across product and country management structures. Accordingly, he viewed this as a devotional requirement for substantial improvement so that the ethos of 'thoroughness' was actually put into practice:

'While our fundamental principles haven't changed – while indeed (they) . . . would have been embraced by all of the former leaders of this Company – the growth in the realization of how much room exists for improvement in carrying out these principles is breath-taking. . . Vital is the commitment to improve our processes and systems and to work with one another in a manner that builds teamwork . . . and fosters ownership and personal expertise' (J. E. Pepper, June 1989)

During his tenure as CEO, E.L. Artzt also sought to justify a major drive for improved productivity by drawing attention to the dissonance between what he perceived to be increasing levels of bureaucracy and the commitment to personal responsibility and self discipline from which participants derived their sense of distinctive, shared identity. Artzt framed the challenge as less technical or instrumental than a recovery of the ethos of the organization by putting into practice the values that participants knew to be valuable and worthy, but that had become more evident in the rhetoric than in the reality of administrative complexity:

'We have too much bureaucracy and wasted effort, too many layers, too much capacity, too much cost, leading to overpriced products . . . We must change (because) we're dedicated to those simple values that have made this Company truly unique since its founding in 1837. . . a Company that honors and respects individual initiative at every level of the business'. (E.L. Artzt, December 1993)

The sheer complexity of P&G operations, operating across more than 50 countries in multiple product categories, led to the recurring concern that the need for multi-category, multi-location co-ordination could inhibit taking personal responsibility for the development of existing or new product categories. This conflicted with what Walter Lingle had highlighted in his definition of 'thoroughness', which depended on fostering a sense of individual

ownership and accountability for results of the business units. Thus, as the Head of US Operations, D. Jager, underlined when he sought to implement a further re-organization of P&G in 1996, the core objective was to increase the quality of decision-making based on recovering the commitment to individual responsibility. Improved performance was accordingly related to actions which were consistent with what were commonly expressed as core beliefs but which had been neglected in contemporary practices:

‘Let me touch on a couple of principles that I feel very strongly about. The first is Respect for Individuals. It’s so basic to P&G’s culture. We all believe in it. We all talk it. But the fact is we don’t always practice it consistently, especially in tough situations.’ (D. Jager, June 1996)

During the same period of organizational transformation, CEO Pepper extended the practice implications of the distinction between rhetoric and reality by arguing that the core organizational values were a taken-for-granted set of beliefs that only took full effect when they were more closely linked with specific attitudes and actions. Thus, an ambitious agenda for rapid growth was associated with the translation of the core values of the organization, such as ‘thoroughness’, from abstract good intentions into a clear specification of their performance implications. As Pepper stated:

‘There is certainly no question that we all believe in these values . . . The most important change we’ve made, however, is that we’ve broken out specific principles and specified the behaviors required to live them.’ (J. E. Pepper, July 1996)

By offering such a contrast between the *rhetoric* and the *reality* of consistency with the value of ‘thoroughness’, these leaders consistently asserted the need for change as a personal imperative, demanding new commitment to a more authentic expression of the organization’s essential values. In highlighting ‘thoroughness’ as an aspirational ideal, managers promoted an identification dynamic of emulation (Pratt, 1998) where this expression of organizational values served as a point of reference for personal transformation. Senior executives returned to the core values of the organization as an aspirational narrative template, which, as Thornborrow and Brown (2009) suggest, included both a definition of success and an account

of what is involved for its achievement. Accordingly, the maintenance of coherence with the past was conceived as a constant struggle for contemporary members of the organization to emulate their predecessors, with the assurance that this would produce equally desirable consequences.

Ends versus means

The core value of ‘thoroughness’ was further re-interpreted through a distinction between its misperception as an over-riding objective and its more appropriate conception as a means to achieve superior performance. In this way, senior managers sought to address the possibility, highlighted by Selznick (1957), of overconformity to central and distinctive values and the decreasing organizational responsiveness with which it was associated. Such differentiation between ends and means implied a critique of contemporary practice, where organizational participants had displaced the historically valued methods as goals in their own right.

Managers were thus able to frame new strategic priorities for the organization, such as a much faster pace of new product development, more effective global exploitation of product innovations, or more ambitious programmes of product innovation or of market entry, while nevertheless underlining the central and distinctive values of rigour, discipline, and individual responsibility. This argumentation is well illustrated by E.L. Artzt when, as Head of International Operations, he argued that organization participants had misunderstood the enduring corporate commitment to ‘thoroughness’ as justified for its own sake rather than as a means to compete quickly and effectively with global competitors:

‘We must get faster on our feet. Our corporate forebears never intended for our dedication to thoroughness to equate to coming in last when we’re in a horse race or to making our operations so complex that each change, each step ahead requires massive disentanglement’. (E.L. Artzt, December 1982)

A further refinement of this distinction of ‘thoroughness’ as means rather than ends is apparent when senior management sought to prioritize the pace of innovation and market

entry. Here, commitment to ‘thoroughness’ was conceived as a potential barrier to successful innovation when analysis of potential consumer demand and distinctive product benefits was so extensive that it restricted the quantity of new product introductions. In order to increase the flow of new product entry, emphasis was placed on the value of thoroughness in the ongoing consumer feedback to new products. For example, as Head of US Operations, D. Jager questioned the necessary relationship between ‘thoroughness’ and growth. He argued that ‘thoroughness’ only supported growth when applied as a means of responding to consumer response rather than as an absolute quality to be pursued for its own sake:

‘As a company, we have to learn to move much faster with more good ideas. Continuously trying to perfect our initiatives before we move is counter to successful growth. . (Rather) they need to be constantly improved as new needs emerge and as the expectations of the consumers rise’. (D. Jager, June 1990)

This dissociation of ‘thoroughness’ as an organizational methodology rather than a defining objective, further served as a technique of flexible adaptation. This was because managers could hold the process of ‘thoroughness’ constant while changing the ends to which it was applied. This is well shown during a period of retrenchment in the early 1990s, when the commitment to an expansion in the quantity of innovation was replaced by a focus on the breakthrough quality of innovation. Emphasis was now placed on the rigour of the planning and investment processes to focus on fewer, high potential return initiatives rather than on the rigour of post-launch evaluation. As the Director of Research and Development argued:

‘A step change in productivity (of innovation) like this requires new ways of working in the future – markedly better than our current approaches. . . moving away from practices commonly employed by P&G. . . Better focus yields faster returns . . . We know we can afford to prioritize far more rigorously than we do today.’ (T. A. Moore, October 1993)

Indeed, as P&G became committed to a new trajectory of rapid growth from 1995, under the leadership of J. E. Pepper, an entrenched misunderstanding of ‘thoroughness’ was at the heart of this change. Senior managers contrasted ‘thoroughness’ as a structuring principle, leading to what the Head of International Operations, W. C. Berndt, defined as ‘excessive

perfectionism', against 'thoroughness' as a shared commitment towards individual responsibility, which would lead to greater scope, scale and pace of innovation. As Pepper himself stated during this period of transformation:

'We need to change – and change dramatically – to innovate bigger, get to the market faster and stretch our goals and achievements further. . . Perfectionism and the need for control slow things down and foster distrust' (J.E. Pepper, September 1998)

This distinction between the appropriate designation of 'thoroughness' as corporate competence rather than the inappropriate designation of 'thoroughness' as a corporate objective in its own right was further extended by A. G. Lafley, on becoming CEO in 1999. He asserted the need for organizational transformation because he argued that the shared commitment to the optimization of organizational processes had lost sight of its fundamental *raison d'être* - the interests of the consumers that they were designed to serve. As he stated:

'Unfortunately, the policies P&G has adopted to optimize our internal operation too often make us unresponsive to consumer demand. . . To accomplish this, to really do this, we are going to have to challenge all of the functional attitudes, beliefs, behaviours we've learned over the course of our careers and get focused on one thing – doing whatever it takes to delight a consumer who will only become more demanding.' (A. G. Lafley, November 1999)

The implication was that pride in 'thoroughness' as a professional attribute of the 'functional' roles, departments or divisions had supplanted an understanding of the purpose such 'thoroughness' was necessary. As Lafley articulated a core and governing objective behind the defining value of 'thoroughness' – 'to delight the consumer' – he was re-specifying the taken-for-granted assumptions on which this distinctive organizational value had been based. In this way, Lafley framed radical transformation as a reflexive interrogation of the reasons why the value of 'thoroughness' had been, and should remain, so important to the organization and its participants. In highlighting the importance of 'thoroughness' as a means rather than an end, it also provided a cogent critique of contemporary practice. Although this was challenging to the status quo, it nevertheless represented an affirmation of how the continuity of the core and distinctive values could and should be maintained.

Letter versus spirit

Continuing emphasis on the defining value of ‘thoroughness’ also served as a resource for change because it was conceived as an overarching principle or ‘theory of action’, which could and should be progressively defined, rather than a set of practices that had to be literally replicated as historically justified rules, routines or traditions. For instance, when P&G sought to implement Total Quality, this was framed as inherently consistent with the company’s core principle of ‘thoroughness’. However, the fact that the organization had always been committed to the value, and had developed practices to reflect this, did not imply that it could not learn new techniques for its implementation. As the Director of Production argued:

‘Hasn’t Procter always stood for quality, for thoroughness, for continual improvement? . . . Yes of course. But Total Quality adds a number of new dimensions to these traditional Company values’ (D. S Swanson, December, 1986)

Commitment to the spirit of ‘thoroughness’ underlined the importance of questioning the replication of even those practices that had served the organization particularly well in the past. This is well illustrated in 1987 when CEO Smale sought to explain the development of a new organizational structure based on ‘category management’, rather than the divisional structure that had operated since 1955. Smale rejected the inherent validity of tradition and expressed confidence in the change he proposed based on the active, contemporary and contextualized commitment that it demonstrated to the guiding value of ‘thoroughness’, and the ethic of delegated responsibility on which it depended:

‘While the division structure has worked well over the past 30 some years. . . there is no question in my mind that our business is going to be stronger in the future as a result of this new organization structure . . . Most important of all, the result of all of this will be to move responsibility down in the organization.’ (J. G. Smale, June 1987)

The distinction in favour of the essence of the value over its literal or automatic replication recognized the role that new generations of organizational participants played in necessarily adapting its meaning to new contexts. Thus, for instance, as senior managers at P&G placed

increasing emphasis on global capabilities as a source of competitive advantage, the meaning of ‘thoroughness’ shifted from a disciplined and rigorous approach at the individual market level to incorporate a broader conception of ‘thoroughness’ for the development of concepts and technologies with relevance in multiple countries and regions. As the Director of Research and Development argued, the global context demanded a new approach to rigorous evaluation:

‘If we stick to our old ways of operating, competition will beat us around the world with our own good ideas. . . This reflects the sequential qualification and expansion thinking of the past, rather than the concurrent mode we need in the future. . . We need to consistently ask, “what would I be doing differently if this were a true world idea, and not just a local initiative”.’ (R.T. Blanchard, March 1989)

The efforts managers made to adapt the meaning of ‘thoroughness’ to the changing organizational context also particularly reflected the importance that the value held for employees as worthy and valued members of the organization. For example, when senior managers sought to implement an exceptional process of retrenchment through compulsory redundancies in 1993, they made efforts to justify this radical shift as consistent with the spirit of ‘thoroughness’. CEO Artzt acknowledged that it might appear that the organization’s commitment to delegated responsibility was being undermined by the imposition of corporate control over human resource decisions. However, he challenged this perception by arguing that the status of downsizing as an extraordinary and regretted measure highlighted the continuing centrality of delegated responsibility as a guiding principle and, moreover, that the centrality of this value ensured the meritocratic basis on which such difficult judgments would be taken:

‘I know that SGE [involving a compulsory redundancy programme] has caused some to wonder if our traditional values with respect to individuals may be changing. They are not. We all wished that SGE could have been avoided – at least the downsizing part. It is unavoidable . . . We are doing everything we can to stand by our principles of fair treatment through this process.’ (E. L. Artzt, November 1993)

The lesser significance afforded to literal correspondence with earlier expressions of this core value also enabled managers to extend its sense of contemporary relevance. This was most

evident in the argumentation offered by J. E. Pepper, who made a productive distinction between the implicit and explicit articulation of the organization's core values. As Pepper sought to generate enthusiasm and commitment for the organizational transformation that he launched as CEO in 1996, he developed new labels to express these values by underlining the central importance of implicit meaning, rather than restricted adherence to only those interpretations that had been made explicit in the past:

‘The core values that we are showing grow directly from our heritage. However, unlike our previous statement. . .we have also explicitly established the values of ‘trust’ and ‘passion for winning’ which, while with us all along, were not specifically spelled out before.’ (J. E. Pepper, March 1997).

W. C. Berndt, as Head of International Operations, further utilized the distinction in favour of the spirit of ‘thoroughness’ when he sought to justify a new approach to strategy development during the major organizational change programme, ‘Organization 2005’. In a speech in July 1998, he argued that the organization had failed to take full advantage of its growth opportunities because of a narrow definition of ‘thoroughness’ in strategy development. He argued that, ‘the traditional process . . . resulted in mostly linear, incremental improvements . . . because the General Manager would typically start the process by having a work team of relatively junior people perform a thorough analysis of the issues the category was facing’. Given the highly standardized strategies that this produced, and the number of market opportunities that were identified by competitors ahead of P&G, Berndt drew on the expertise of a highly reputed management consultancy to propose a refinement of the definition of ‘thoroughness’ in strategic planning. He advocated ‘an iterative process’ between the general manager, the category team and senior management that would generate ‘a more rigorous process for developing and selecting among possible strategic options’. Hence, Berndt rejected the automatic replication of standardized strategy development processes across the organization as only having the appearance of ‘thoroughness’, based on the weight of tradition. In contrast, he advanced a refinement of strategic planning that he

argued was more evidently rigorous because it drew on emerging understanding of best practice that could lead to a ‘richer development and testing of options than we have done in the past’.

Hence, through this emphasis on a broader understanding of the spirit or essence of the value of ‘thoroughness’, senior managers were able to justify the role of active interpretation in extending its relevance to the contemporary context. This dissociation underlined ‘thoroughness’ as a broad principle, or theory-of-action, whose significance was progressively refined and revealed on the basis of experience. The lesser significance given to any automatic or literal replication of prior formulations not only offered managers the opportunity to extend its meaning and application, but also enabled them to develop new and more contemporary labels for the continuing value commitments.

Discussion

Our paper has sought to investigate an inherent leadership challenge associated with the temporal duality of organizational identity claims. In exploring how P&G senior managers were able to reconcile claims of consistency with the central, distinctive and longstanding organizational value of ‘thoroughness’ while claiming adaptive flexibility in the present, we address the challenge posed by Kraatz (2009) to uncover the nuanced complexities of the symbolic leadership role and the rhetorical inventiveness with which it is associated. On the one hand, we found that senior managers at P&G acknowledged and deferred to the organization’s inherited commitment to ‘thoroughness’ as a material constraint on the range of appropriate decision choices that were available. On the other hand, we found that they rhetorically inserted this commitment within a dynamic value hierarchy in order to carve for themselves considerable degrees of practical-evaluative agency (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998). In this way, they fulfilled the role of ‘institutional leadership’, steering a course

between the ‘utopianism’ carried in ideals inherited from the past, and the pragmatic ‘opportunism’ associated with responding to the demands of the present (Selznick, 1957).

Thus, in highlighting the balance that was achieved between coherence with past understandings and active responsiveness in the present, we address calls for the study of temporal dynamics in identity discourse (Corley and Gioia, 2004; Brown, 2006; Ybema, 2010; Schultz and Hernes, 2013) to gain further insight into the ‘potentiality of exploring the past in order to influence the future’ (Schultz and Hernes, 2013:19). Here, we draw attention to the dynamics of retrospection, less as a nostalgic longing for a past certainty (Brown and Humphreys, 2002) than as an ongoing, inquisitive challenge to uncover the meaning, relevance and responsibilities of past commitments for current and future organizational action (Maclean et al., 2014). The connection of the organizational past to the organizational present and future is seen to depend on the ‘organizational identity work’ of managers to sustain its plausibility and relevance as a resource for action (Anteby and Molnar, 2012; Clegg et al., 2007; Kirchner, 2013). In keeping with Sillince and Simpson (2010), we have highlighted the rhetorical inventiveness required to make claims of organizational consistency over time despite the inherent complexity of the multiple perspectives and interests with which the organization is associated.

As we summarize in Table 1, three dissociation devices were especially prevalent in this ‘organizational identity work’ of senior managers at P&G. By offering the contrast between the *rhetoric* and the *reality* of consistency with commitment to ‘thoroughness’, leaders asserted a need for change as an obligation to realize a more authentic expression of the organization’s essential values. The establishment of a value hierarchy, which distinguished between the rhetoric of the cherished, longstanding commitment to thoroughness and its actual manifestation in practice, framed current operational strategies as a ‘recovery’ of the organization’s core identity (Ravasi and Schultz, 2006). In this way, the leaders of P&G

addressed demands for consistency with past structures of meaning, while, in the selection of which aspects of ‘thoroughness’ to emphasize and of how particular practices could effectively support their implementation, carving out substantial scope for organizational agency in the present.

Table 1: Rhetorics of Dissociation at Procter & Gamble

Dissociation Device	Definition	Impact on Practice	Temporal Dynamics
Rhetoric-Reality	Thoroughness as espoused value vs Thoroughness as value-in-practice	Re-evaluation of practice based on discrepancy with expressed ideal	Recovery of the past value in the present
Ends-Means	Thoroughness as objective vs Thoroughness as means to achieve objective	Re-evaluation of practice based on objectives they are designed to achieve	Re-interpretation of the past value in the present
Letter-Spirit	Thoroughness as fixed concept or theory vs Thoroughness as emergent and context-dependant practices	Re-evaluation of practices based on learning	Continuous re-specification of the past value in the present

By establishing a value hierarchy between practices treated inappropriately as *ends* in their own right rather than as *means* for the achievement of more fundamental objectives, senior managers signaled profound discontent with the status quo, and the mechanistic application of historical precedent as a justification of the routine activity with which it was associated. In the recurring emphasis of the commitment to ‘thoroughness’ as an organizational competence rather than as an organizational goal, senior managers could introduce a very different set of objectives, based on adaptive responses in the present while still maintaining what participants experienced as some essential aspect of the organization’s cultural heritage. This differentiation between ends and means as a powerful resource for the management of stability and change provides support for Brunninge (2009), who identified a similar process

in the development of internet banking at Handelsbanken. Here, the strong commitment to decentralization, which was initially regarded as a core and determining objective for the organization, and hence a reason to reject the implementation of internet banking services, was translated into a method for implementing the new technology. Thus, as Brunninge (2009: 21) notes, strategic change at Handelsbanken, as at P&G, could be legitimized as along ‘a continuous line of development’, with the attendant benefits for its internal acceptance.

By differentiating between the *letter* and the *spirit* of this core and distinctive value, senior managers rejected over-confidence in established definitions of ‘thoroughness’, in favour of incremental learning and emergent understanding based on the changing contexts in which this value commitment was applied. This promoted continuous adaptation by celebrating the organizational commitment to this historic value, while recognizing that full understanding of its meaning remained constantly open for ‘discovery’ (Ravasi and Phillips, 2011), in light of the changing scale and scope of the organization, of the actions of competitors, and of new techniques and technologies as they became available. By stressing the context-dependent goals that a commitment to ‘thoroughness’ must serve, they were able to respond to changing stakeholder expectations while sustaining the strong connection to their distinctive cultural heritage. Indeed, this represented an effort by leaders to re-enact an established value claim as a vital, shared commitment in such a way that it could be re-experienced by contemporary participants with the intensity of feeling associated with their predecessors (Howard-Grenville, 2013). Contemporary organizational members were invited to discover for themselves what ‘thoroughness’ could mean given the contemporary challenges the organization was facing.

Consistent with Gioia et al. (2000) and with Chreim (2005), this ‘organizational identity work’ involved a re-use of existing labels and their re-definition in order to ensure the

continuing relevance of the historical precedent. However, we differ from the work of these scholars by suggesting that the expansiveness of the value claim or label was not disconnected from previous definitions of its meaning, but rather became more clearly articulated through the imposition of a value hierarchy that placed emphasis on claims of its ever more accurate specification. Hence, the work of leaders was less concerned with imposing a new adaptive meaning than on re-interpreting the inherited meaning of the value label in such a way that was both intelligible and emotionally resonant for those who were familiar with prior claims and interpretations. This points towards a more continuous form of organizational identity performance, where the accommodation of the past in the present is ongoing rather than periodically re-set (Schultz and Hernes, 2013).

Indeed, we bring to light a source of dynamism in claims of organizational identity, as not only apparent during periods of crisis and conflict but as also potentially inherent in the ongoing reproduction of the complex temporal discourses of organizational stability and change. We show that managers do not necessarily assume the unproblematic replication of values inherited from the past, but rather may work earnestly and creatively to maintain their relevance. Although this implies some discursive path dependency, where ‘prior discourse shapes the kinds of discourse that are able to appear’ (Spicer, 2005: 885), we suggest that this does not necessarily result in decreasing attention to the present or decreasing scope for active intervention. On the contrary, it was the very richness of the historical path trodden by P&G, and the deep and shared commitment to remain guided by the value commitments with which it was associated that offered the resources to resist organizational atrophy. Informed by current results and future goals, senior managers sustained a productive ambiguity. Values inherited from the past were celebrated for the sense of a distinctive community that they instilled. Yet, the understanding of the lessons they offered and the extent to which they were fully applied, remained constantly open for recovery (Ravasi and Schultz, 2006) or discovery

(Ravasi and Phillips, 2011), thereby enabling continuous re-assessment of the efficacy and appropriateness of established routines and the taken-for-granted understanding of the legacy from the past. Thus, we show that organizational identity and organizational change are not mutually incompatible, because as Gagliardi (1986: 130) indicates, change ‘is not really a question of disowning the basic values on which collective identity is founded, but rather of broadening its range of options’.

However, we believe that this rhetorical focus on the maintenance of a value claim associated with organizational identity points towards the need for further research. It should be noted that we have identified only a few of the dissociative techniques identified by Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969). Further empirical research in multiple organizations may yield a more comprehensive definition of prevalent dissociative techniques, and the contexts in which their use is most appropriate. The appearance of consensus in the use of dissociation at P&G, and its seeming acceptance, may also be misleading. The establishment of a value hierarchy between what should be treated as true and essential and what only appears to be the case easily lends itself to critique and a layering of rhetorical moves, as Van Rees (2009) illustrates in her analysis of evolving arguments during the Grand Jury investigation of President Clinton (see also Fairhurst, 2007: 115). Given the ordering function of dissociation, a closer, more dialogic study of dissociation, looking for the arguments and counter-arguments over the construction of a particular value hierarchy as the basis for action (Van Rees, 2009), may shed new light on the discursive practice of resistance (e.g. Humphreys and Brown, 2002) and conflict (e.g. Glynn, 2000) over identity claims. In arguing for such close attention to the pragmatic use of language in the organizational context, and its inter-textual relationship with the discourses that have preceded it, we add our voices to those, such as Tsoukas (2005) who draw attention to stability and change as symbolic constructions generated by participants as they talk about past values and routines.

Conclusion

The implication of our study is to conceive of any specific formulation of organizational identity as an emergent process, a work-in-progress (Pratt, 2012), with a clear parallel to the challenge of ‘identity talk’ at the individual level (Pratt, 2012; Pratt and Kraatz, 2009; Sillince and Simpson, 2010). Just as human beings struggle to justify their claim of individuality through ‘identity work’ that seeks to reconcile claims of flexibility with claims of self-consistency over time (e.g. Clarke et al., 2009; Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003; Watson, 2009), managers engage in ongoing ‘organizational identity work’ (Anteby and Molnar, 2012; Clegg et al., 2007; Kirchner, 2013) as they seek to articulate both consistency with past organizational value commitments and organizational responsiveness to the challenges and opportunities in the present. Through this reconciliation of these competing logics, oriented to the past and to the present and future, managers actively validate the claim of organizational individuality (Czarniawska, 1997) or ‘self-hood’ (Pratt and Kraatz, 2009). Yet, we do not claim that theirs is any more than a temporary accomplishment. Our perspective suggests that the relationship between the claims of who we have been and who we are becoming as an organization is in a ‘constant state of flux’ (Gioia and Patvardhan, 2012: 57). The delicate balance between the organizational past and the organizational present and future must be constantly re-calibrated by organizational participants as they seek to construct, define and justify what the organization is becoming.

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